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ABSTRACT

The conduct and use of qualitative research and the role of fiction as a way of examining the experiences of an African American woman are explored. The paper uses an alternative qualitative model to examine issues of power, equity, and race in the particular context of the African American woman. It discusses the writings of Zora Neale Hurston as a framework and compares the ethnographic stories in three Hurston short stories with a fictional ethnographic interpretation of related academic experiences. Telling a life experience as fiction is comparable to, and perhaps the same as, the "fiction" gathered during ethnographic moments. Researchers accept the ethnographic narratives gathered as data as experiences recreated by the narrator. Creating fiction can be a way to create objectivity through distance from a complex experience. (Contains 36 references.) (SLD)

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Rhonda Baynes Jeffries

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Rhonda Baynes Jeffries

Introduction

Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, Nella Larson, and Alice Walker, as well as countless other African American women writers, eloquently narrate the experiences of themselves and their people. Tangled within these narrations are the conflict and contradiction inherent to life in America for women of African descent. From Larson's narrations of Harlem Renaissance life to Walker's and Morrison's more recent descriptions of the black female experience, the theme of power and equity remains present, and unfortunately, unresolved within African American women's literature. Inevitably, issues resolved within the fictional narrative utilizing elaborate literary techniques are perpetually unresolved in reality.

In a similar fashion, the microcosm of academia presents comparable dilemmas for women of African descent. This phenomenon has not escaped myself as an African American female existing within and struggling to comprehend a system operating on premises designed against my interests. Without doubt, many experiences in my life have led me to question and grapple for the meaning of many human interactions; however, none of those experiences have led me to the level of questioning that my time in academia has done. This paper addresses,

through a fictional literary creation, what I see as the convoluted nature of academia for one African American woman.

Further complicating this examination is not only my identification as an African American woman, but also my orientation toward qualitative research methodology. Having never considered alternative ways to understand my world - the one in which I work and live, as well as, the ones I am privileged to invade - I embrace qualitative methods as an effective and ethical way of knowing. Qualitative techniques acknowledge and validate marginilized voices and experiences. Using these methods renders my experience real. My qualitative orientation is not something I do; rather it is something I "yam" (Ellison, 1972). Albeit more recent arguments have supported the validation of qualitative work, the historical debate within the research community has long situated qualitative methods at a lower status to positivist forms of investigation. Hence, this orientation has created additional marginalization to my academic work experience. Again, the story revisits themes of unresolved battles of power and equity.

This paper utilizes an alternative qualitative model to examine this phenomenon. It explores several unresolved battles of power and equity by examining African American women's literature and the "fictional" ethnographies found in this body of work. Specifically, it discusses the writing of Zora Neale Hurston as a framework for comparing the ethnographic stories found in these works against a fictional ethnographic interpretation of my own academic experience. It is within the context of academia, coupled with my undergraduate training in English, that led me to reflect upon the educational value and transferability found within this genre of African American literature. For my experience, as with much of the work in African American women's literature, the names and places have been changed. The story remains the same.

Finally, this paper will discuss the use of fiction in qualitative ethnographies. Without attempting to offer simple resolutions to these imbalances of power, the paper posits the use of multidimensional examinations of information, such as are used in this paper, as a means of understanding and improving these equity issues.

Fiction as an Ethnographic Framework

> We were not inventing a new wheel. That had already been done, only ignored, even by Black men, for more than a hundred years" (McKay, 1989, p. 90).

It is only during the last two decades that Zora Neale Hurston's work has risen to prominence and received the recognition of the work of more recent authors like Walker and Morrison. Hurston's work was literally ignored for years as her multidimensional constructions of African American life were oppositional to emerging writers of the 1940s who more directly addressed civil rights issues in their writing (Hurston, 1995b).

The major concern of the novelist of the early and mid-twentienth century was personal development as is the case with Hurston's work which systematically explored race, class and gender oppression (Hudson-Weems, 1989). Hurston was intent on creating images of African Americans as cultural participants in this country based on their full existence and not only on their race. She suffered alienation among her peers due to her contradictory, nontraditional framing of race. This called into question her normality since she viewed African Americans as "neither better nor worse than any other race" (Hurston, 1995a, p. 783). Her interpretation of race was one of social construction, and she diminished racial distinction in her declaration that, "All clumps of people turn out to be individuals on close inspection" (Hurston, 1995a, p. 782). It

is from this perspective that Hurston built her work and the following stories demonstrate her struggle to represent the African American dilemma within this framework.

Drenched in Light

Drenched in Light is a story centered on a young girl named Isis Watts. Isis is faced with the oppressive demands of her grandmother, with whom she lives, to work constantly and forego the pleasures of childhood. Every playful act Isis performs is met with reprimands from Grandma Potts, and being the only female child around increases the pressure she receives to be "ladylike." When Grandma Potts wakes up to find Isis and her brother preparing to shave their sleeping grandmother's whiskers, she flees the house in shock. Shortly thereafter, Isis hears a band approaching her house and remembers a carnival is occurring in town. With Grandma Potts out of her way and nothing to look forward to besides an impending whipping for the shaving stunt, Isis grabs a red tablecloth to use as a Spanish shawl, and follows the band to town. Isis runs for the woods when Grandma Potts sees her entertaining a gaping crowd of people, and soon a White couple from the carnival find her and promise to take her home and assist her in escaping Grandma's wrath. Isis's is met with her grandmother's insults and frustrations about the new tablecloth being ruined. The White lady offers Grandma five dollars to replace the tablecloth and requests the company of Isis stating, "I want her to go on to the hotel and dance in that table cloth for me. I can stand a little light today . . . I want brightness and this Isis is joy itself, why she's drenched in light!" (Hurston, 1995b, p. 25).

Hurston uses this story to explore gender and racial issues. Isis's representation as an oppressed female is traditional in the sense that she is forced to do chores from which her male siblings are excused and when circumstances go awry, as with the shaving incident, Isis is

blamed and awaits punishment but her accomplice escapes conviction. She is indeed a troubled female; however, Hurston paints her as a character full of light, spirituality and perseverance, despite her oppression. Again, in the traditional sense, women are expected to accept the inequities they face in life with positive attitude -- to grin and bear it.

Racial dimensions are examined in this tale in very nontraditional ways, most vividly with the grandmother oppressing the granddaughter. Hurston's commitment to address the race problem in an individualistic and politically incorrect manner is displayed here in her placement of an African American oppressing another African American. She uses this technique to reinforce her belief that it is individual people and not groups of people that create the race problem. Furthermore, she places two individuals from within a racial group at odds with one another to expose the deep entanglement of race and class that convolute the race problem and in fact, make the race problem questionable as a categorical reality. Grandma Potts is easily paid off in this story by an individual of another race who is generally seen as the traditional oppressor. This exaggerates the theme of individual relationships as a White person saves an African American person from oppression rather than subjecting her to it. Additionally, it demonstrates the class issue that confronts African Americans in the obscured quest for racial unity and financial stability. As Grandma takes the money and gladly relinquishes her granddaughter for a meager five dollars, African Americans' lack of unity is directly linked to their quest for economic gain. Hurston (1995b) addresses this phenomenon in her essay Negroes Without Self-Pity where she cites J. Leonard Lewis, attorney for the Afro-American Life Insurance:

> He pointed to the growing tension between the races throughout the country. Then he, too, broke tradition. The upper-class Negro, he said, must take

> responsibility for the Negro part in these disturbances. "It is not enough," he said, "for us to sit by and say, 'We didn't do it. Those irresponsible, uneducated Negroes bring on all this trouble.' . . . We must abandon our attitude of aloofness to the less educated (p. 932-3).

As the mature adult in this story, Grandma Potts is responsible for Isis. She is the educated, upper-class Negro in this relationship to her powerless granddaughter, and she does not act responsibly toward another within her racial group. Hence, Grandma Potts' transgressions toward Isis are magnified through the telling of this story because they demonstrate that one would sell their own child for money. This story makes locating the race problem in traditional ways difficult at best.

Magnolia Flower

In Magnolia Flower, Hurston, again, tackles the inequities present in race and gender relationships. This story focuses on Bentley, a runaway slave, and his daughter, Magnolia Flower. Bentley is hardened by his enslavement and despises anything that reminds him of his past. Ironically, as slavery ends and he acquires some measure of material wealth, he builds a house in the plantation fashion and hires many African Americans to work as his servants. To assuage his hatred of his former oppressors, and to reduce the hypocrisy of his plantation lifestyle, Bentley only hires the darkest of African Americans. Hurston describes the philosophy underpinning the treatment of his workers as fascist: "He had done violence to workmen. There was little law in this jungle, and that was his, -- 'Do as I bid you or suffer my punishment'" (Hurston, 1995b, p. 35).

Bentley longs for Magnolia Flower to read and be educated, so he commissions a school and hires an educated, light-skinned African American man to teach at the new school. Immediately the teacher falls in love with Magnolia Flower and asks Magnolia Flower's father for her hand in marriage. Thinking his education would impress her father, the teacher never considers his skin color a factor that would ruin the deal. Bentley is furious, orders the teacher to be hanged and demands that Magnolia Flower marry Crazy Joe, who is dark-skinned, so their children will be dark, as well. Magnolia is devastated and determined to defy her father's wishes. She makes a deal with her father's servant to get the key to release the school teacher from his holding cell, and she and her lover run away together. When Bentley realizes that he has been duped by his daughter, he decides to punish the servant for allowing her to escape and in his anger, has a heart attack and dies. Time moves on and everything that Bentley has worked for disappears as White developers create a town completely over Bentley's existence. The story ends with Magnolia Flower and her school teacher coming back to the site of her home 47 years later celebrating their love.

As in Drenched in Light, Hurston deals with gender oppression, but not to the extent that she explores the race problem. Her depiction of Bentley forcing his daughter to marry against her will is typical and widely used. Women have been portrayed as property of their fathers and subsequently their husbands for centuries. What is unique in this story is the depiction of African Americans creating their own race problem. Hurston (1995a) describes this conflict in *Dust Tracks on a Road* where she:

> sensed early, that the Negro race was not one band of heavenly love. There was stress and strain inside as well as out. Being black was not enough. It took more than a community of skin color to make your love come down on you (p. 731).

Ultimately, Bentley's desire to exercise power over his daughter on a racial issue brought about his demise. Hurston further illustrates the irony internal racism creates by using a darker skinned man as the oppressor against a lighter skinned African American who was warned by Magnolia Flower when he proposed marriage that "youse too white" (1995b, p. 36).

High John de Conquer

Finally, High John de Conquer, one of Hurston's most powerful stories, transcends categorization in its address of power and equity issues. Although the author uses slavery, a system laded with racial, gender, and economic oppression, as a backdrop for this story, themes of race, class and gender are superseded by messages of spirituality. In this tale, High John de Conquer is characterized as a spiritual and physical being. "First off, he was a whisper, a will to hope, a wish to find something worthy of laughter and song. Then the whisper put on flesh" (Hurston, 1995b, p. 139). This character inhabited any individual who found a will to celebrate life in spite of deplorable working and social conditions. High John de Conquer helped slaves endure by placing laughter and song on the slaves' minds, and of course, White people were struck dumb and, in a sense, rendered powerless by this behavior.

High John de Conquer was a hope-bringer and is compared to Brer Rabbit in his ability to play tricks and make a way out of no way. He was compared to King Arthur for he has come and is gone but he left his legacy for future generations to cling to for strength. The most remarkable thing about John de Conquer was his ability to fight a "mighty battle without outside-showing force, and winning his war from within" (1995b, p. 141). On one particularly cruel plantation, John de Conquer told the slaves that they needed to leave the plantation and find a song to improve their conditions. The slaves, taking a break near the veranda where Old Massa

and Old Miss were sitting and could see them, were afraid to leave, so John de Conquer advised them to "just leave your old work-tired bodies around for him to look at, and he'll never realize youse way off somewhere, going about your business" (1995b, p. 145). At first they were resistant but finally gave into his strong advise. Soon they were dressing in fine clothes, mounted above an enormous black crow, and traveling and singing in jubilation. They soared into Heaven and as they were learning this song "that you could bend and shape in most any way you wanted to fit the words and feelings that you had" (1995b, p. 147), a loud voice broke through. They looked around and there was Old Massa and Old Miss sitting there as they had left them and Old Massa was the loud voice. The slaves felt terrible but High John de Conquer advised them to ignore Old Massa and to consider that they had "something finer than this plantation and anything it's got on it, put away. Ain't that funny? Us got all that, and he don't know nothing at all about it. Don't tell him nothing. Nobody don't have to know where us gets out pleasure from. Come on. Pick up your hoes and let's go" (1995b, p. 147). So, the crowd began to sing as they returned to their work.

Maintaining control of one's mind despite lack of control over the body, thus rendering external circumstances inconsequential to the quality of one's existence or the fulfillment of one's life, becomes a universal message in this story. In this story, quality of life is determined and measured by the individual agents, and when one views life in this way, the magnitude of oppressive acts can be diminished.

Fiction and Narrative Research: My Story

The political implications of narrative research, using "life story, conversation and personal writing," (p. 75) are examined by Elbaz-Luwisch (1997) as serving to create a particular

story about a particular subject using individual participants' narrations. Unlike more traditional and accepted modes of inquiry, this model does not seek to make generalizations about subjects, although it very well may. With this model, focus is placed on the process through with participants move and how participants are able to use the process by use of the product which is the story, the ultimate goal of this research technique. Elbaz-Luwisch is concerned with how participants, who give their narratives to build the story, are protected and recognizes these as "instances in which fictionalizing could be helpful as one way of enabling these stories to be told, but this solution is both technically and methodologically difficult" (p. 82). Narayan (1991) argues that the powerful feelings evoked in story telling can be objectified by "providing a perspective outside the tangled flow of experience, [thus] stories are also therapeutic in the detachment they evoke" (p. 114). I agree with these determinations and will use story telling, narrative, "fiction," - "a part of the aesthetic form, a resymbolization of experience" (Grumet, 1991, p. 68) - as a process for me to understanding my academic experience, to further deconstruct the intersection of race, class and gender, and to continue the exploration of fiction as a qualitative technique. Here it goes:

It was a hard journey and a long time coming, but Johnnie had arrived. She was out of the field and in the big house. Walking along side Old Massa everyday, she had been prepared for this. She had the codes; at least she thought she did. She had practically mastered the language; two of them even. She had the right clothes and style of hair. She was a tolerable shade. The plan was laid, and all she had to do was walk on it. Old Massa told her to come on in. He could work with her. And he did. She hung around in that house for a while, picking up on a few tricks here and there. Now, she wasn't the brightest star in the sky, but she was no fool

either, and although her knives were sharp, she rarely used them. This, perhaps, was a fault. Nevertheless, that is who she was.

Johnnie spent right smart amount of time in that big house, and she paid her dues, despite her tolerable shade. She was just two generations from illiterate, so this wasn't no cake walk, you see. Now, bright stars and sharp knives aside, she had her eyes open from the jump street, and even though Old Massa had his way of reminding her from time to time who she really was, there were buffers along the way to ease the bitter taste of the dreaded human chemical mix. And as life goes on, school ends, graduation time comes, and we all must grab our boot straps and forge on. That is the American way. Resistant to leave the comforts of home and the set of characters she had come to know, despicable though many of them were, Johnnie's eyes were filled with hope that she could make it in any big house. Really, she knew Old Massa well, and if you've seen one massa, you've seen them all. Right?

Well, let's see. Johnnie sets off for her new plantation. The lay of the land is different, so she shakes off the shock by remembering that all the players are the same. They just got on some new clothes, new hair-doo, whatever. This is reassurance to her, yet she smells a fish -- only he's dressed as a man, his name is Tom, and he's literally a snake. Now, Tom is not to be ignored which is probably why Johnnie smelled him so fast. He practically knocked her down with assurance to her that he was her friend and that if she wanted protection against Old Massa, she should stay out of sight and let Tom know whatever her needs were. Tom wants Johnnie to trust him and Johnnie wants to trust him. Everyone has told her she can't trust Old Massa and that she and Tom should stick together to combat the race problem. So Johnnie gives Tom a chance.

As soon as Johnnie gets good and unpacked, ready for her life at her new plantation, Tom is in her face telling her she had better get her lazy butt to work 'cause Old Massa got high expectations, and Tom is already well aware of how lazy people like Johnnie are. He claims he knows 'cause he's seen all her aunties and uncles and cousins before her come to the plantation and get sent away due to their lazy ways. And he informs Johnnie that he can tell by just looking at her that she has been coddled at home and at her last plantation. Tom is there to make sure all that ends. Yes, sirree.

So, remembering Tom's offer to protect Johnnie from Old Massa's evil ways, she gets busy creating some work that will be acceptable to Old Massa. She ain't ready to leave that plantation. Never mind that they are a dime a dozen, and they are all alike. Johnnie is trying to do the right thing, and that would include eating. To appease Old Massa's demands and prove Tom wrong about her and her entire family tree, Johnnie makes a cake. She passes the cake by Tom just to get some notion of whether or not it is fitting for Old Massa. Tom said he would give it a once over -- make sure it looked and smelled right -- so Johnnie could get that cake to Massa and stay in his good graces. But, Tom never gave the cake back to Johnnie and when she asked him about it, he pretended not to know what she was talking about. Frustrated but eager to do her job, Johnnie made another cake and took it right back to Tom to get his okay. Months went by and Tom did not say a word to Johnnie about the cake. He did, however, take every opportunity to remind her what a lazy, worthless individual she was. Now that, he did without delay. But the cake never resurfaced and Johnnie was left wondering what Tom was doing with her hard work.

She went to visit Tom in his quarters to see if she could find that cake, and low and behold, a master detective could not have found a cake in that abomination. She left with her

head held down and began to question Tom's motives. Tom assuaged her doubts with a visit to educate her on the ways of the plantation. He had been there for quite some time and as far as he was concerned, he was the HNIC. Who better to get advise from than Tom? He boasted of his feats around the plantation. He had watched a many foolish individual, such as Johnnie, leave the plantation simply because they had solicited Old Massa's help when they should have been aligning themselves with Tom. How foolish could they have been not to know that you can't trust Old Massa and that the aunties, uncles and cousins should all be united to combat the race problem? Right? Tom even bragged on how committed he was to ameliorating the race problem. He had used his unmatched power to fight Mister Charlie and Miss Anne and Old Massa had not said a word. He had it going on.

Reassured that Tom was her best ally, Johnnie went back to work and this time she made a pie. Time was moving on and Old Massa hadn't seen much come from her quarters. She knew she needed to do something fast, and she didn't need Tom to tell her that. However, he had told her that he was her advocate, and everybody knew that an advocate was a good thing to have. So Johnnie took the pie to Tom because she didn't want to present anything unacceptable to Massa and suffer that wrath. Going to Tom had become what appeared to be the lesser of two evils, so Johnnie forged on. Tom took the pie and told Johnnie it was about time she made something. He asked her if she thought she could live on the plantation for free and burst into a thunderous roar of laughter. Johnnie laughed in Tom's face but she was growing weary of his demeaning conversation. This wasn't funny. She was on the plantation trying to survive and all he could do was hurl insults and laugh. Johnnie was considering ceasing her relationship with Tom, but what was the use. He had the pie now and she needed to deliver it to Massa. Old Massa was waiting

for something and at this point, her tally sheet was not looking too good -- especially to hear Tom tell it. So Johnnie waited and the pie never returned.

Angered, feeling desperate and a bit abused, Johnnie approached Tom, and although it was out of character for her, she pulled her knife on him. Tom responded in kind but eventually realized Johnnie was on to him, had him in a corner, and was not going to back up. He promised to give her the pie with all the finishing touches it needed so she could get it to Massa and get some marks on that tally sheet. And give it back he did -- with his hand print smashed into the top of it. According to Tom, the pie was missing ingredients, half-baked and unacceptable for presentation. His advice was for Johnnie to go back to her kitchen. Johnnie was furious. Any real advocate would have at least invited her to back to his or her kitchen to see what kinds of things he or she would put into an acceptable pie; perhaps inform her of a little secret ingredient that was never on the recipe, but essential to a good pie that Old Massa would take.

Determined to rise to the occasion, Johnnie decided to salvage the pie. She added more meat to the pie and sprinkled it with seasoning, but not to overwhelm the eater. She always believed that a true pie connoisseur would like to have space for his or her tastebuds to interpret the pie. Quickly she returned the pie to Tom and he swore the pie was as awful as it was on its previous run. With this Tom continued with a barrage of insults about how lazy he knew Johnnie was from the very start and how disappointed he was that she was not doing any work. It was becoming clear to Johnnie that this mechanism was futile. She was not ever going to get anything to Old Massa following this route. She began to circumvent Tom. He was a problem despite his continued claims to be Johnnie's motivation against the ravages of Old Massa. Johnnie proceeded to present various cakes, pies, even entrees to Old Massa. Believe it or not, he accepted them. Johnnie was getting a few marks on her tally sheet. Tom should be proud.

He was a race man and should be relieved that something was occurring to combat the race problem. Perhaps Johnnie would not be sent away from the plantation.

Johnnie continued in this fashion and by this time Tom has ceased asking Johnnie about her work or even wasting time to throw stones. It was clear that Johnnie knew who Tom was, and he knew she knew. He was actually avoiding her, which was fine with Johnnie. This way she didn't have to endure his abusive bombardment of hostile language. Still she was confused and baffled at his behavior. What happened to the fight against the race problem? And to think Old Massa was supposed to be the source of her trouble!

Now Tom was avoiding Johnnie and she was avoiding him. Things went on like this for some time and it appeared that it was to be a workable situation. But, what happens next, Old Massa can't be blamed for. If you really think about it, Old Massa can't be blamed for a lot of things because people as intelligent as Tom should have control over their own minds. Unfortunate pity how easily people are influenced, even against themselves. Anyway, Tom, by default, became the overseer and there was no more avoiding him. Where he had been occupied with his own self-promotion prior to this event, afterward, by virtue of the job's responsibilities, he was tinkering with the policies and procedures of the plantation. His politicking was reduced but the power he possessed over policy and procedure gave him a high he could not resist. Tom was so drunk on power he was forgetting to change his clothes. But he was telling everyone else how awful their clothes looked and doing so in loud, boisterous tones. He was out of control and again, Old Massa wasn't saying a word. Johnnie saw the writing on the wall, but she still wanted to have faith in Tom's earlier statements. She wasn't crazy. She knew she couldn't trust Old Massa but as of late, Tom certainly was looking like a massa to her.

As was earlier stated, all plantations are essentially the same. They have periodic evaluations to determine if you are worthy to stay on the plantation or if you should be put on the boat and shipped back from whence you came. That time had come for Johnnie and with Tom as the overseer, she sensed trouble. And trouble she got. Tom planned to continue his avoidance behavior to keep Johnnie in her place. He decided to ignore her evaluation and hope that she would just keep quiet and stay out of his way. He was going to take care of her future, so she didn't need to be concerned about it. That is what he told her from the very beginning -- just stick with him and he'd take care of Old Massa. But Johnnie pursued the evaluation in an attempt to protect herself. She couldn't understand why in the world Tom was determined for this event not to happen. He, in his usual fashion, responded to her insistence with insults, but this time they were formalized and even written on paper -- Old Massa style.

Needless to say, when Tom got through with Johnnie, she was smaller than an ant on Kilimanjaro. He managed to reduce everything she had done, without his assistance, to the lowest level of insignificance. He was surely never going to let any more of her cakes and pies get past him to the big house, let alone this feast she thought she had prepared. As far as Johnnie was concerned, it was on now. No more waiting around to see what Tom was going to do next. She told Old Massa's right hand man, but she forgot that he, was just another HNIC. In fact, he was Tom's daddy and he protected Tom like a gorilla with her newborn. Johnnie was so outdone she refused to wait to be put off the plantation, especially at the hands of her own people. What happened to the race problem? She left in bewilderment and figured she would rather be gotten by Old Massa at another plantation than by Tom and his daddy right there. At least that way, she knew who she was up against, right? What happen to the race problem? What happen to the fight? Who is the enemy, anyway?

Understanding and Utilizing the Story

We have previously established that the mind need not be restricted to the body's experience and that this form of agency can be employed by oppressed persons for transformations. However, this unrestricted mind set is available for those who wish to assume power, not only for self-transformation, but to reapply their power on those who have yet to reach their level, and with their assistance, never will. The convoluted nature of race, class and gender is aptly exposed in this story about Johnnie and Tom, but many questions remain. Obviously, Johnnie presented no advantage to Tom in respect to her race and gender. Would Tom have responded differently to Johnnie has she been useful to him in his personal class and misguided race struggle? How do we understand and categorize a story of this type where there are no clear representations? Are there ever clear representations in the performances people use in their lives? (Jeffries, 1997).

Patricia Williams (1991) struggles in her autobiographical text to understand the intersection of race, class and gender. She remarks in her afterword the difficulty the Library of Congress had in attempting to categorize her text. Among her suggestions to her editor were "Fiction," and "Medieval Medicine." She claims the battle for categorization is appropriate since her text is not about race or law but about boundary and "while being black has been the most powerful social attribution in my life, it is only one of a number of governing narratives or presiding fictions by which I am constantly reconfiguring myself in the world" (p. 256). It is much too simple to situate the race problem as a premier problem. One can only see race in this way if one chooses to ignore everything else.

There is a long history of African American women being expected to support the agenda of racial uplift -- to address the race problem -- through education. African American women were educated for the sole purpose of remaining in their communities and educating other African Americans who would not receive any education otherwise (Harley, 1982; Neverdon-Morton, 1982). Granger (1983) and Howard-Vital (1989) examine this history in light of African American women's achievement in higher education and notes that even as African American women are portrayed as assertive and dominant, African American men still receive higher salaries and more advanced degrees. Furthermore, she reports African American women in higher education routinely experience isolation and conflict regarding the race versus gender problems.

Coleman-Burns (1989) examines the historical positioning of education for African American women as serving the needs of the white community. Education in this capacity provided whites with disciplined workers and in the traditional sense of education for the masses, primarily functioned to socialize these women for the establishment's needs. It is only later that social justice came into play as a reason African American women should be educated. "African American women cultural workers (including scholars, writers, artists, philosophers, authors, artistic performers and teachers) represent a potentially new genre of American intellectualism. Their potential is limited only by the prejudices and discrimination present in a racist, sexist, and classist society" (p. 146).

> It is the black graduates of institutions of higher education who go out into the world and distribute and apply the culture of oppression. This phenomenon is most vividly observable in viewing the inner city school teacher who Griffin (1965) observes as the "preservers and perpetuators of the status quo, teachers

tend to act and think along the class lines of their socioeconomic superiors. They are instruments of social control, not agents of social changes" (p. 79-80). Furthermore, Sexton (1979) notes "that teachers tend to identify with upper income groups -- with their opinions, aspirations, and way of life -- and many of them long to be accepted in this stratum. If the long is great enough and the identification strong, there will be little desire to help. Instead, there may be indifference -- and at worst, contempt . . ." (p. 230)

As evidenced in the story of Johnnie and Tom, and in the work of Ladson-Billings (1992), matching skin color will not appropriate for power injustices in our current social state. The assumption that eliminating the white, male enemy will alleviate power inequities is false. We need any easy target, and the white male's history of privilege creates one. Unfortunately, it is not the white male, but a white male mentality that perpetuates injustices, and that mentality has been assumed by humans of every description.

Toward a Definition of Fiction as Qualitative Research

Describing humans with thick, rich texts is a staple definer of qualitative work (Merriam, 1997; Patton, 1990). It is those thick, rich descriptions, narrations from human experience, that are the data from which analysis and understanding of human behavior occur. The diversity of human experience necessitates flexibility and variability in the processes and mechanisms by which qualitative analyses are conducted. Therefore, "a description of a single, prototypical qualitative method is not possible or desirable" (Bradley, 1993, p. 433). Many discussions speak to the technique used in this examination: multiple-genre writing (Ulmer); a new genre of text as literature (Barone, 1990); polyphonic, heteroglossic, multigenre constructions (Rose, 1990). Although other studies and textual examinations exist in this vein, they have not been classified,

categorized, or commodified as qualitative work. How do we work toward a definition of fiction as qualitative research?

Woods (1993) notes that researching exceptional educational events required many teachers to explore "their life histories in seeking to explain the nature and significance of the events. These are described as "'critical events', as they brought comparatively sudden radical change . . . radical in the sense of confirming and preserving a teacher's cherished beliefs, which, often, at times were in danger of being undermined by forces beyond the teacher's control" (p. 447). Woods offers myriad support for the use of biography and life history as research tools for understanding teacher-thought and practice. "As a teacher and a researcher, I feel ultimately tangled in the need to use my life history as a means for understanding not only my practice, but the tools I use in my practice". Woods' words express notions similar to my use of Ellison's yam metaphor. He is what he does, and for good reason. It is the mechanism by which one unfolds the intricacies of a professional life governed by the personal experience. There is no separating the professional and personal experiences in the mind or body. One can only wear masks to survive those experiences. (Plant, 1989).

Telling a life experience as fiction is comparable to, perhaps the same as, the "fiction" gathered during ethnographic moments. Researchers fully accept that the ethnographic narratives gathered as data are experiences recreated by the narrator in a manner with which they can live and that researcher and readers can hear. Florio-Ruane (1991) considers the fiction written and labeled "ethnography" by Carlos Casteneda (1968) and Jean Auel (1980) as examples where science is a branch of literature. In this case, form or presentation affects the "relationships between the author and text, audience and text, author and audience" (p. 241),

hence, what we find in ethnographic events structurally resists standard interpretation and requires presentation (Hymes, 1980).

Standards and traditions have long enabled oppression in every aspect of human life. The quantitative paradigm has been a standard in research circles which disempowers people and create feelings of inadequacy, disjunction of theory and practice, the development of specialties and "one best way" mentalities, as well as, fear of subjectivity (Liebowitz, 1991). Qualitative research acknowledges the impossibility of maintaining objectivity for any longer than brief moments and "posits an empirical reality that is complex, intertwined, best understood as a contextual whole, and inseparable from the individuals – including the researchers – who know that reality" (Bradley, 1993, p. 431). Creating fiction can perhaps be one way to create an objectivity, a distance, from a complex experience in order for that experience to be understood, processed and used for growth and learning.

To Pause on a Journey

Separating empirical research which seeks to find, if not one truth, then many truths, from literature and fiction "is a notion that is given careful treatment by MacIntyre (1981), who claims that in diminishing the cultural place of narrative (e.g., in sociohistorical, biographical, intellectual, moral, and religious traditions), we have encouraged the disconnection of narrative from life, resulting in an opposition between art and life" (Witherell, 1991, p. 93). Furthermore, "theoretical discourse has typically been language held by those in power, and it has often structured our reality by pointing to fixed and impartial frames of reference – hallmarks of the exclusive reliance on separate knowing (Helle, 1991, p. 63).

As the written word is used to legitimize civilizations, oral forms of knowing are valued to a much lesser degree. Organizations and establishments, including our legal system, support the use and belief of written language as the most reliable method of understanding and validating information. The voices that are literally recorded are the voices of power. Or perhaps more appropriately stated, the voices of power are the voices that are literally recorded? Understanding that many people of nontraditional power, such as Hurston, who is discussed in this work, have written and published for centuries, the former statement is acceptable. What is less obvious in this statement is the contradiction in the belief that having ideas and information written and published establishes credibility and increases the power of the information and its position. If this were the case, many of the works included in the African American literature category would have long been included among the American classics and many class reading lists. This is generally not the case. Hence, the written word only legitimizes civilizations of established power. The voices of power are the gatekeepers to literary production. Those gatekeepers may legitimize the word by printing it, but they invalidate the word by ignoring it.

Hurston, fearing rejection from her White publishing outlets and rejection from her Black community, was waging a war against White and Black oppression in her texts. Suffering from a lack of understanding from critics, her texts were misunderstood by traditionalist who "could not see that there could possibly be a way to deal with the struggle of Black people which was different from the traditional mode of speaking out about it" (Plant, 1989, p. 22). Her work lost power in response to her audience's inability to understand the literary techniques she used to convey a message that would be palatable to a White audience who would only print her words if they were framed in subtle, inoffensive ways and to a Black audience who would only believe her words if they were overt. Power and inequities manifest in such a myriad of ways. Reducing

these inequities has been addressed by Black women writers and literary critics who "have done much to reshape education by reclaiming the Black women's intellectual tradition. Through the richness of their many voices, this tradition, which emphasizes the pluralism in our society, is crucial to the reconstruction of the 'canon' of American thought and literature" (McKay, 1989, p. 91). It is through the literary canon that we save our representations of ourselves and in creating fiction see how "the new story worked old learning into a shape that was portable over time, so new learning could begin . . ." (Stafford, 1991, p. 27).

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